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Historical Sketch of Joseph Spencer

Major-General of the Continental Troops,
Member of the Council of Safety,
Congressman, Judge, Deputy,
Deacon, and Farmer

Compiled by

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State of Connecticut



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The family records of the Spencer family of East Haddam, Conn., state that Joseph Spencer was born in East Haddam, October 6, 1714, and that he died there January 13, 1789.

He was the son of Isaac and Mary (Selden) Spencer of that district, and the great-grandson of Jared and Hannah Spencer, who were among the first settlers of East Haddam in 1662 (Mss. Gene. Rec. of East Haddam families).

August 2, 1738, Joseph Spencer married Martha Brainerd, by whom he had five children; their fourth child, Joseph, became a surgeon and served as such and as aid to his father in the Revolution.

He married 2d, Hannah (Brown) Southmayd, by whom he had eight children (Mss. Gene. Rec. of East Haddam families).

Without the advantages of a school education, Joseph Spencer acquired that general knowledge and acquaintance with business which enabled him to discharge happily and usefully the various duties to which he was called.

March 14, 1746, he joined the church of the Millington Society, and was elected a deacon November 20, 1767. He was excused from such service during the Revolution; was re-elected April 4, 1788, and retained this office until his death (Statistical Account of Middlesex Co., p. 81).

The peace of Utrecht in 1713 put an end to a desolating war with the French and Indians, and during the next thirty years but few events of importance occurred in the Colonies. In 1744 "King George War" broke out between France and England, and at once brought the Colonists into hostile relations. At

the time of the crisis in 1746-7, when the frontier line from Boston to Albany became no longer tenable, we find Joseph Spencer had carefully followed the situation; he had enlisted in the trainband, and on January 28, 1746-7, received his first appointment by the General Assembly, at New Haven, as Lieutenant of the company or trainband of the parish of Millington (Col. Rec., Vol. IX, p. 375).

A treaty of peace was concluded October 7, 1748. By its stipulations the British and French mutually gave up whatever territory each had taken, and the vigorous effort of the New Englanders, thus rendered useless (Garneau).

At the close of the war, Joseph Spencer turned his thoughts again to his home and the local affairs. He had been brought up under a strict religious discipline, trained to realize that the growth of the Colony, as well as his own possessions, depended upon his individual efforts.

The strong but loving influence of his parents was deeply impressed upon this young man, as is shown throughout his life; his spirit was never daunted, even under the most trying circumstances. He would never allow that the most difficult undertakings could not be accomplished; his failures spurred him onward and upward.

In 1750 he was appointed Deputy from East Haddam to the Legislature, and at each meeting of the General Assembly he was reappointed consecutively for fourteen years (Colony Records, Vols. X to XIII).

From the autumn of 1753 until his death he was Judge of Probate for the District of East Haddam (Statistical Account of Middlesex Co., p. 81).

Then there arose the Seven-Year War, over the dispute between the French and English as to the ownership of the territory bordering on the Ohio; 1753 the French seized British traders and fort, which was followed by Colonel Washington's attack, capture of

Jumonville and his men, the battle of Great Meadows, General Braddock's defeat, the battle at Lake George, the third expedition against Crown Point, in which the Virginia, New York, and New England troops all took part.

Joseph Spencer was deeply interested in the reports of the trials and sufferings of his countrymen, and increased the amount of his time given to local military affairs, and by his intense interest and devotion had risen from Lieutenant to Captain, and was appointed Major of the Twelfth Regiment of this Colony, in the Northern Army, by the Colonial Assembly, Thursday, October 13, 1757 (Col. Rec., Vol. XI, p. 68).

In March, 1758, as Major of the Second Regiment, and Captain of the Third Company, under Colonel Nathan Whiting, participated with his regiment in the invasion of Canada (Col. Rec., Vol. XI, p. 96), the expedition against Louisburg, Ticonderoga, and Crown Point.

In 1759 he received from the General Assembly his appointment as Lieutenant-Colonel of the Second Regiment, under Colonel Nathan Whiting (Col. Rec., Vol. XI, p. 226-354; Vol. XII, p. 249), and served as such during the siege of Quebec, and succeeding years until his appointment in May, 1766, Colonel of the Twelfth Regiment, during which he was also appointed a member of the Governor's Council (Col. Rec., Vol. XII, p. 459; Cyclopedia U. S. History, Lossing, Vol. II, p. 1330).

Colonel Spencer served from 1766 to 1780 as the assistant to the Deputy Governor (Col. Rec., Vol. XIII). He was appointed by the Legislature at the special April session, 1775, First Brigadier-General of the Regiments then ordered for "the safety of the Colony"; he was also appointed Colonel of the Second Regiment, and his commission was dated May 1, 1775. He marched with his regiment, by order of the Legislature, to the camp forming around Boston, and took

post at Roxbury. During the siege of Boston he commanded a brigade of four regiments, including his own, with Parsons and Huntington, in General Ward's division at Roxbury (Conn. Men in R., p. 37).

At the special April session, 1775, Israel Putnam was appointed by the Legislature Second Brigadier-General and also Colonel of the Third Regiment. By order of the Legislature, his regiment marched to the camp forming around Boston and took post at Cambridge, senior officer present (Conn. Men in R., p. 37).

At a meeting July 13, 1775, of Governor Jonathan Trumbull and his Council, his Honor the Governor laid before the Council a letter to General Washington, containing the following:

"I have to observe to your Excellency, that the Honorable Congress have altered the arrangement of the Generals appointed by our Assembly. We wish the order we adopted had been pursued, and fear Generals Wooster and Spencer will think they have reasons to complain. They are gentlemen held in high estimation by our Assembly, and by the officers and troops under their command. There are reasons to fear that inconveniences will arise from the alterations, made by the Congress, in the rank and relation of those Generals; at the same time they have the highest sense of General Putnam's singular merit and services" (Mss. Col., 5 series, Vol. X).

"Two of the Council, Samuel Huntington and William Williams, were appointed to wait upon General Spencer at Gray's, the tavern where he had just arrived, and confer with him on the subject-matter of his dissatisfaction, etc., and endeavor to remove, etc., and reconcile him to cheerfully pursue the service, which he did accordingly.

"In the afternoon of the same day they met again at the Governor's, where General Spencer attended, and had a long conference with him on the subject-matter of being superseded by the General Congress, putting

General Israel Putnam above him, etc., which he thinks is very hard and results, etc., and is at length persuaded to return to the army, and not at present quit the service as he proposed.

"General Spencer set out on his return to camp with the letters to General Washington" (Am. Archives, 4th series, Vol. II, p. 1658).

One hundred and twenty-nine years ago today (June 22, 1775), Colonel Joseph Spencer was appointed Brigadier-General of Continental Establishment, by the Continental Congress, at the instance of General Washington.

General Spencer's Second Regiment was raised on the first call for troops by the Legislature in April-May, 1775, and was recruited mainly in present Middlesex County. The General with detachments of officers and men engaged at the battle of Bunker Hill, June 17th, and in Arnold's Quebec expedition, Sept.-Dec., 1775; it served until expiration of service, December, 1775, and accompanied the troops to New York, the next field of operations, and assisted in fortifying the city and vicinity.

August 9, 1776, General Spencer was promoted to Major-General of the Continental Army, and given command of a division composed of Parsons' and Wadsworth's Connecticut Brigades. He was present at Long Island at time of the battle August 27th, half of his division being engaged; present at White Plains October 25th, and on December 14th was ordered eastward, and took command in Rhode Island, which was surrounded by Admiral Sir Peter Parker's forces. General Spencer remained in command through 1777.

He organized an expedition of about nine thousand State troops against the enemy at Newport, and on October 26, 1777, attempted a forward movement, but the weather and failure of one brigade to report in time caused miscarriage of the plan.

Jonathan Trumbull, in a letter dated December 2,

1777, to General Washington, wrote the following relative to the affair: "The expedition to Newport hath unhappily failed. An inquiry hath been made into the reasons. General Spencer was exculpated. A Brigadier Palmer failed in his duty. The enemy were meditating an attack on Bedford, and had actually embarked troops, which were prevented by this."

General Spencer invited a court of inquiry and proposed another effort. Exonerated by the court November 15, 1777, Congress on December 11, 1777, ordered an investigation.

General Spencer resigned December 20th following, and on January 13, 1778, Congress accepted the resignation, "for the reasons offered by him in his letter of the 20th." (Copy of letter, pages 7-11.)

February 12, 1778, General Spencer was elected a member of the Council of Safety for this State (Vol. I, Rec. of State, p. 537); May, 1779, appointed First Major-General of the Connecticut Militia, succeeding Major-General Jabez Huntington, resigned (429 Conn. Mss. in R.); the same year was appointed Delegate to Congress by the General Court; 1780 he was elected to the State Council and held that position until his death (Cyclop. of U. S. History, Lossing, Vol. II, p. 1330).

Thus it is seen that the eminent patriot General Joseph Spencer was engaged in the service of his country from as early as he was able to bear arms until he died at the ripe age of seventy-five years.

The letter of General Joseph Spencer to President
George Washington and the Continental Congress.

DATED:

Providence Dec^r 20th 1777

Sir

Permit me to Lay before Your Honor, & the Honorable Congress a further Account of the difficulties, that have attended the support of this Army, and that still subsist here relative thereto — when I Arrived here the 1st of January last, and untill some time in August, there was in this State A Regulating Act, fixing the prices of the Articles Necessary to support the Army and while that Act continued in force, my Quarter Master was enabled by this State to take by impress such Articles as was Necessary for the subsistence of the Army, provided he could not obtain them by purchase at the stated prices: when I was informed that, that Act was Repealed on the 25th of August I made application to the Council of War, to know what provision was, or would be made by the State for the Supply of the Army, (as the Regulating Act was Repealed) in case the Necessary Articles could not be obtained by purchase at a reasonable rate, and not Receiving any Written Answer for some time, on the 12th of September I wrote again on the same subject, to the Council of War, a Copy of which I enclose, and on the 15th rec^d the Council's Answer a Copy of which I also enclose, by this Resolve of Council, my right to supply the Army with Necessaries by impress, giving the Owners a Reasonable price for the Articles taken seemed to be granted, provided I could not obtain them by purchase, but then the very difficult and important question, what was a reasonable price was left solely to me to decide, in this Situation I thought it would be the most prudent and safe way for me to Instruct my Quarter Master, to purchase what he could at the prices we had formerly given, and what he could not obtain at that price he must take by Impress, paying at the present what was formerly allowed, with Assurance to the Owners, that a Representation of the matter should be made to Congress, and that on hearing the case Your Honors would doubtless allow what was Just and right; on these terms the Quar^r Master supplied the Army untill the beginning of Nov^r altho:

not without some Complaint amongst the people; Then the Council of War Mannifested their unwillingness to have the Army Supply'd in any other way, than giving the Common prices to the Owners for them, and were desirous that I should take it on myself to supply the Army in that way, and run the risk of the approbation of the Accounts, which I declined to undertake, without some aid and Assistance from them, as it appeared to me that it was very uncertain, wheather we could long obtain Necessary Articles for any sum of Bills, as the contempt of them was daily increasing, and also I apprehended it was too dangerous a Matter for me to Risk the settlements and approbation of such Exorbitant accounts, as I must have to settle, if I supply'd in that way; The Council then by their Resolve of the last of October Ordered that I should be requested to give Orders for purchasing such Necessary Articles as the Army in this State required, at the most reasonable prices, at which they could be procured, and if their should be any deduction made in the settlement of those Accounts, the sd State would pay what was deducted; since which the Quarter Master has supplied agreeable to the direction of said Resolve; The Quarter Master has given a list of the prices of a few of the principle Articles at which they have been procured since Oct^r, and also of the price they ware set at in the State Bill or regulating Act. which I enclose, Your Honors from This Representation will please to direct what further Allowance shall be given for the Articles rec^d for the Use of the Army, on the Conditions above Mentioned from the 15th of September to the last of Oct^r; the prices of the Articles procured for the support of the Army, being three or four times as much as they were untill the repeal of the Regulating Act, it now takes such enormus sums of Cash to supply a little Army, by reason of which and other disappointments, we are now reduced to Extreem want of Cash in this Army.—when I rec^d the Resolve of Congress of the 18th July, directing me to apply to Mr Hancock D.y. Pay Master for Cash; I imedeately made Application to him Accordingly, but by reason of one Obstacle or another, I have never to this time been able to obtain from Mr Hancock for the Use of this Army but about Twenty Thousand Dollars, and none until the beginning of Nov., which was brought by Mr John Adams Mr Hancocks Assistant, Mr Adams then informed me, that he would come again at any time that I should appoint, giving him a few days Notice, and that he expected soon a supply, of Cash, Mr Adams also desired me to give Orders to the several Commanders of Reg^{ts} to be ready with their pay Rolls at the time I set for him to come, and on the 16th of Nov. I wrote to Mr Adams to be at Providence the 9th of Dec^r for the purpose of paying the Troops and supplying the Army with Cash, I

also directed the several commanders of Regts to be ready with their Pay Abstracts, properly prepared to receive their pay as the pay Master would be here by that time, which preparation they Accordingly made, and several of them came twenty miles for the purpose of receiving their pay, and the very day Mr Adams was expected to pay the Troops, I rec^d to my very great and distressing disappointment, a Letter from him, dated the 4th Decr Informing that he had no Cash but what was needed at Boston, a Copy of which I enclose, since which I have Rec^d nothing further from the pay Master and I am at present put to Extreem difficulty for want of Cash, as the Treasury of this State from whence I used to borrow is exhausted, and I am informed there is no Cash to be had in either of the adjacent States, I have informed Mr Hancock that in my Opinion he ought to let us have a part of the Cash he receives, if there is not Enough for the supply of the Troops at each Department; could I have had a reasonable proportion of the Cash, Mr Hancock has rec^d it would have given considerable satisfaction, but to be totally Neglected; unless there is more than is wanted for the Troops in and about Boston Affords us Just Matter of Complaint.— I Esteem it my duty as a Commander to give it as my Opinion to your Honors for the safety of this State in particular and the United States in General, it is Necessary that this Army should be more carefully attended to; there has been for a Year past a very Considerable Army of the Enemy in this State, the Summer past, and untill the present time—By indisputable Accounts, the Enemy have been 3600 Strong, Besides the Tory Troops, and Marines belonging to the Ships in the Harbour, with which they are near 4,000; there is now (mostly Arrived within a few Days) twenty Ships and Sloops of War, and 9 or 10 of them of the Line, the Enemy doubtless design to keep Possession of the Island of Rhode Island while the Contest Continues; they can make a very Considerable Army, with their Land and sea force, and it will be a Wonder if they should continue very Long without laying some part of this Country Waste, it will not give us Security that they will not for the future destroy any part of the Country, because they have done so little Mischief the Year past, they have doubtless several times heretofore had it in Contemplation to make a descent on the Main, but have never put it in Execution, in any considerable degree, once they landed in North Kingston with a party of 2 or 300 Men, but were drove off, without doing much damage, and we have full Evidence that a Considerable Number Embarked with a design to make a landing some where, but the place uncertain; on the Night of the 16th of Oct^r but hearing by a Deserter from us that Night, that our Army designed a descent on the Island the same Night, they disembarked,

the Evidence of this we had not only from Deserters and Prisoners, but found a Return of 390 of the 43^d Regt that Embarked that Night on board the Ships, amongst the papers taken in the Syren Frigate, that run on shore at Point Judith. On the whole, I think prudence requires that an Army should constantly be kept up here for defence, of at least 4,000 Men, and this I understand has been the Opinion of a Committee of the New England States, that lately took the Matter in Consideration — the Army which has been here since may, in General Including Officers, and also the sick, on an Everage (without regard to those Call'd in Oct^r for the designed Expedition), amounts to about 2400 Men, as will appear by the Monthly returns sent to the *Hon^{ble} Board of War by this Express* — There is in the Army here at present about 22,00 Men 8,00 of them from the state of Massachusetts — and from New Hampshire 260 — the times of the Massachusetts and & N Hampshires are out the first of Jan^y. — the rest of this Army are of this State — Connecticut have sent none here (except those for the design of making an attempt on Rhode Island) since last May: the calls on them from the Westward & Northward and for guards on their own shores have been so great — The state of the Massachusetts as I have been informed Design to send 15,00 men, but I fear they will not be here timely, to replace those whose times are soon out — This State have Ordered in one quarter part of their Militia: but it is Esteem'd and indeed is Excessively hard upon them — They have paid their own Troops, Except about 500 from the beginning —

I beg to observe that from the above State of Facts, it Appears to me very Necessary for the support and Encouragement, of A Necessary Army for Defence to be kept up in this State — that a pay Master should be appointed to reside Constantly here: there would be a full Employ for one; and that he should be supply'd by your Honors Orders with sufficient Quantities of Cash, for the support and pay of the Army — as it is of greater importance to have this Army Encouraged and supplied, than one, more remote from the Enemy — Major Spencer who has served with me some time as Aid-De-Camp will Convey this — to whom I beg leave to refer your Honors for more perfect Intelligence with relation to Matters at this Post. — he has an extract of the doings of the Court of Enquiry mentioned in my last, relative to the failure of the expedition formed Against the Island of Rhode Island, by which I think it appears that it did not fail by reason of any Misconduct or want of zeal in me. —

Permit me after Making the above Representation to Acknowledge that the Difficulties attending the Command of this department, Requires a Commander of greater Abilities, and in the Bloom and Vigour of

life: and that I Earnestly entreat your Honors that such a person may be Ordered to Relieve me, and that I may have the Opportunity to settle my Accounts Relative to my Command: and have your Honors leave to resign my Office. — Your Honors will please to inform wheather I am intitled to the Allowance of a Separate Command or not.

I have the Honor to be with all due

Respect

Your Honors Most

Obed^t & M^o hble serv.

Jo^s. Spencer.

Hon'ble Congress

Endorsed:

Letter from Gen Spencer

20 Dec^r 1777 — read Jan^y 7. 1778

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